

## Leadership, Social Responsibility And Local Development: Connections From A Social Project Between Company And School

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### Abstract:

**Background:** Business leadership refers to the ability to manage groups of people, transforming them into teams that generate positive results for organizations. 'Leading with purpose' is to awaken organizational behaviors that contribute, even more, to the adoption of corporate social responsibility and the insertion of practices that assist in local development and the lives of its actors. In this context is the Project "Sowing knowledge, reaping wisdom", founded in 2018, in Guarapuava/PR, with ninth grade students from the state education network, carried out through a partnership between a public school and a private company with the goal of decreasing the vulnerabilities of students and the school dropout existing in the transition from elementary school to high school. This study sought to understand the role and performance of business leadership in this Project and its results.

**Materials and Methods:** Methodologically, for this case study (qualitative, descriptive, and transversal) three data collection techniques were used: primary sources (applied evaluations); secondary sources (data collected in the school unit and company collections, newspaper and website reports, social network posts), and literature selection to support the study, which was carried out between July and December 2021. For data treatment, content analysis was used.

**Results:** The findings highlight positive impacts on students, which led to a decrease in school dropouts, increased interest in studies, and improved school grades, in addition to improved affirmation and understanding as young people from rural areas and rural schools (identity); greater interest in continuing education; involvement in the proposed activities; improved self-esteem and individual and group communication; acting as knowledge multipliers, demonstrating critical sense and leadership.

**Conclusion:** The results indicate that joining efforts between schools and companies to manage social projects with common objectives has become essential to achieve results.

**Key word:** Leadership; Social Responsibility; school; Local Development; Social Project

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### I. Introduction

To succeed in a complex and highly competitive business environment, companies need to develop a perspective that extends beyond their institutional walls. This competitiveness has also led to more demanding consumers, prompting organizations to seek ways to differentiate themselves, as this differentiation can bring sustainable competitive advantage in the long term (BORGER, 2001).

Based on this premise, success has been defined through the integration of concepts such as managerial quality, environmental management, brand reputation, customer loyalty, corporate ethics, and talent retention, leading to more efficient management (LÓPEZ et al., 2007).

One level of this efficient management practice is social responsibility, which encompasses voluntary actions taken by companies to benefit both their external and internal stakeholders. Socially responsible companies

rethink their own attitudes, behaviors, and conduct in order to implement actions that promote the well-being of all involved parties (VASCONCELOS et al., 2012).

Incorporating social responsibility practices into a company's routine means assimilating various economic, social, and environmental aspects. For these guidelines to be naturally and purposefully absorbed, leadership commitment is essential, generating value for the business in the same measure as social impact (SANTOS, 2020). Based on the authors' perspectives, leadership plays a crucial role in integrating the various aspects of social responsibility, elucidating the role of organizations for themselves and society. By establishing a clear direction, leadership acts as a central axis, driving the company to become a transformative agent capable of positively impacting its environment and promoting significant changes.

One effective way for a company to promote social responsibility is by engaging in social projects, valuing the experiences of target communities and empowering them to be the protagonists of the actions. Nunes et al. (2017) highlight that social projects have the mission of improving the quality of life in communities, enriching learning and assisting in social development, challenging old ways of thinking and acting through innovative proposals. Therefore, social projects are an excellent way for companies to engage and create change, aligning with the concept of social responsibility.

In this context, this study focuses on leadership and its role in the development of an organization's social responsibility. The object of study is a project entitled "Sowing Knowledge, Reaping Wisdom", which is carried out through a partnership between Bandeira Batatas, a company dedicated to the trade, processing, and transportation of potatoes, and the State Rural School of Palmeirinha District in Guarapuava/PR. The project aims to develop actions to reduce social and educational vulnerabilities in the locality, improving the quality of life and the development of these students.

This vision of a leader inclined towards the external organizational environment and their involvement in corporate social responsibility amplifies and mobilizes employees towards impactful actions both internally and externally. According to Santos (2020), this concern is part of "purpose-driven leadership", a trend in the corporate world that encompasses principles of protagonism, identification, engagement, and consciousness. The qualities and actions of a leader influence the behavior and beliefs of their followers within organizations. In this sense, social responsibility is directly linked to the leadership environment within a company, as leaders are responsible for formulating strategies and promoting the organization's image from a socially responsible perspective (CARDOSO; CAVAZOTTE, 2017).

In this context, the guiding question of this study is: How can corporate management and leadership motivate social responsibility actions and promote local development through social projects in partnership with schools? The main objective is to understand whether the actions of corporate leadership can motivate social responsibility and local development through the "Sowing Knowledge, Reaping Wisdom" project in collaboration with a school.

This study is justified by contributing to the discussion and expansion of theoretical and empirical studies that seek to understand the interrelationship between the potential impact of leadership in social responsibility actions promoted by companies through social projects in partnership with schools, resulting in personal, professional, and local development.

Regarding the structure of the study, in addition to the introduction, the article will include a theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2, reflecting the discussions on leadership, social responsibility, local development, and social projects. Chapter 3 will present the methodological procedures, and Chapter 4 will present the research results. Finally, Chapter 5 will provide the study's concluding remarks.

## **II. Theoretical Framework**

This section is dedicated to reviewing the concepts and studies conducted on the topics addressed in this research: Leadership, Social Responsibility, Local Development, and Social Projects. Firstly, the concepts of leadership will be discussed, followed by the concept of social responsibility and its perspective within the business environment. Next, the concepts of local development and social projects will be addressed, along with the integration of the public and private spheres in the school-business relationship.

### **Leadership**

Over time, different definitions of the concept of leadership have emerged, with various perspectives and directions. However, there is no standard definition, as leadership is understood to have different conceptions for each author, depending on the adopted approach. The studies by Yamafuko and Silva (2015) reinforce this notion by demonstrating that there is still no exact definition of the concept of leadership among scholars, but it involves an individual who serves their followers, understanding the profile of each one in order to develop their competencies and skills.

Among the various leadership theories observed in the literature, a primary division can be mentioned: traditional approaches and new theories of leadership (transformational leadership, authentic leadership, adaptive leadership, ethical leadership, spiritual leadership) (BESEN; TECCHIO; FIALHO, 2017).

According to Yukl (2010), leadership is a process of social influence that involves multiple actors in interactions to achieve a collective goal and can be associated with personality traits and/or the exercise of influence without coercion. There is no one type of leadership that is more important compared to another; all leadership roles should be in harmony with social logic and the context in which they are embedded.

Regarding leadership, it is crucial to recognize that leaders have the ability to inspire people through their charisma and creativity, guiding them towards necessary changes while minimizing the impact of organizational transformations. However, leadership should not be confused with management or supervision. While management has a more administrative connotation, leadership is a social and interpersonal phenomenon that occurs in a specific situation to achieve the organization's intended goals (MANDELLI; LORIGGIO, 2018).

The quest to understand the phenomenon of leadership and the fascination it represents for people is generally due to the natural need and desire to affiliate oneself or others to a collective cause, to a shared objective. Due to the sense of community, it is common to seek individuals who can show the way to follow; a safe direction that minimizes anxieties and builds a value proposition. Thus, the concept of leadership involves the willingness to change the reality around us, seeking better paths in the present that generate value in the future (SOUZA NETO, 2011).

### **Social Responsibility: Concepts and Business Perspective**

Over the past decades, the concept of social responsibility has undergone a gradual change. In general, social responsibility encompasses voluntary actions by companies that benefit both their internal and external stakeholders. Socially responsible organizations are those that rethink their attitudes, behaviors, and conduct in order to implement actions that promote the well-being of those involved, such as initiatives for the benefit of society and the environment (FARIAS, 2019).

Although the topic has gained more prominence in recent years, as early as 2001 in Brussels, Belgium, the European Commission developed the so-called Green Paper. This document outlined the Commission's objective to "promote a European framework for corporate social responsibility" (FARIAS, 2019). The Green Paper delves into the concept of social responsibility and suggests that being socially responsible goes beyond mere compliance with legal obligations. It involves a broader commitment that includes investing in human capital development, preserving the environment, strengthening stakeholder relationships, and making positive contributions to communities.

The debate surrounding the concept of Social Responsibility is as old as the notions of business and company themselves, taking on different aspects as the role and influence of companies in society have evolved. In the early stages, the mere establishment of a company in a particular location was considered an act of social responsibility, as it created jobs, circulated money, and strengthened the local economy, thus ensuring minimal survival conditions for a portion of the population (BORGER, 2001).

According to Morcelli and Ávila (2016), the concept of corporate social responsibility emerged in 1953 through Howard Bowen to refer to the obligations of businesspeople to adopt guidelines, make decisions, and take actions consistent with the goals and values of society.

Over time, approaches and the concept of social responsibility have expanded to encompass broader organizational objectives, such as reputation and stakeholder management. Thus, it is possible to relate socially responsible behavior to the economic performance of organizations, represented by awareness of environmental/cultural issues and differentiation of products from less socially responsible competitors (MORCELLI; ÁVILA, 2016).

In the literature, the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility refers to a diverse set of discretionary social and environmental initiatives (SPRINKLE; MAINES, 2010), as these can include assistance (through human or financial resources) to suppliers that adopt ecological and social sustainability practices or activities focused on the company's impact on local communities. It can also manifest in initiatives aimed at improving employee well-being.

### **Local Development**

The literature on local development can be analyzed from two perspectives: the conventional conception and the advanced conception. According to Oliveira (2020, p. 1698), the conventional conception analyzes the development of the economic system at a localized scale. In the advanced conception, local development is "understood holistically, meaning that humans are seen as transformative agents in their own locality, with elements such as participation, solidarity, cooperation, and a sense of belonging to their territory encompassing their entire historical and cultural evolution."

In the conventional perspective, local development focuses on the theory of economic system development based on increasing wealth, goods, and services. On the other hand, in the advanced perspective, economic growth is seen as secondary to reducing material deprivations (OLIVEIRA, 2020).

In the conventional conception, development is viewed from two aspects: the first argues that development depends on effective intervention by the state or economic agents from outside the regions. The second aspect, also known as local development, recognizes that the capacity for accumulation and capital formation within a locality depends on its potential arising from individual, family, or community origins (from the neighborhood or the city). However, some factors are decisive for its implementation, such as economic, social, cultural, and institutional factors (OLIVEIRA, 2020).

In this context, local development is a process that aims to improve the quality of life of people in a particular region. It relies on the active participation of the community and its stakeholders and the use of local resources to promote economic and social growth. Oliveira (2020) identifies cooperation, solidarity, and a sense of community belonging as key concepts in local development. It involves mobilizing local resources, promoting active participation of individuals and local organizations, and implementing policies and strategies that aim to drive sustainable and equitable growth.

In his studies, Martins (2002) proposes the participation of people throughout the development process. However, the author emphasizes that the distinctiveness of local development lies not in its goals (well-being, quality of life, synergies, etc.), but in the community's role as not only a beneficiary but also an agent through the real and genuine protagonism of each person.

According to Moura et al. (2003), local development focuses on combating social exclusion as a guiding principle and encompasses social, human, and sustainable development, aiming to improve people's lives and society as a whole. As a complement, Figueira (2011) points out that the process of local development is based on five principles: i) the local dimension (territory + community); ii) the participation and cooperation of all local actors (individuals, groups, and organizations); iii) the integration (at the local level) of all sectors of activity that generate dynamics and essential synergy for the process of local development; iv) local issues and problems and the process of local development should be managed locally; v) the strategy for local development should be embedded in global dynamics.

Thus, the relationships between humans and the territory shape the development process of any locality and are responsible for identifying the needs, aspirations, and synergies among existing potential resources. For Figueira (2017), any local development process must be led and implemented by the residents themselves in order to reinvent the territory they inhabit. Through active participation and the relationships established between local actors and the territory in which they live and work, people will be motivated to create stable life projects for those who reside in the area.

In this context of reflection, education emerges as an important instrument for local development, as it enables individuals to become more aware of their needs, aspirations, and resources, thereby enabling them to collectively generate processes for improving the territory they reside in and for themselves.

### **Social Projects: Integration between Company and Community**

A social project can be defined as a plan or collaborative effort to improve one or several aspects of society, enhancing the citizenship and social consciousness of individuals by involving them in the construction of a better future. One component of social projects is social innovation, which refers to new strategies, concepts, and organizations that address social needs of various kinds: working conditions, education, health, and/or community development (HORTA, 2013).

Potentially involving multiple actors, a social project or innovation can belong to the first, second, or third sector. The first sector is the public sector, formed by the government, and all its actions should be directed toward the citizens' interests. The second sector has a private nature and is involved in the production of goods and services with a profit motive. The third sector, on the other hand, encompasses private or public entities that operate on a nonprofit basis, commonly known as "Non-Governmental Organizations" (HORTA, 2013).

Here, we will focus on the perspective of social development supported by the second sector, namely for-profit companies. Heidrich (2010) explains that during the 1990s, partnerships between companies and public institutions, especially schools, intensified. The increased access to classrooms and the demand for quality in public education led companies to mobilize and direct investments to this area as part of their social responsibility.

The purpose of partnerships between companies and public entities is not to "compensate" for the state's actions but rather to contribute to improvements in the surrounding community. According to Shiroma (2007, p. 63), these partnerships tend to be effective in promoting effective outcomes in society: "positive actions play a decisive role in economic growth and poverty reduction. In the field of education specifically, it is necessary to educate adaptable workers who meet the demands."

In the long term, social projects and developed strategies have a much greater positive impact than their immediate effects in a specific context, challenging existing social relationships. This makes the actions taken a source of social transformation and contributes to the emergence of new development models (CRISES, 2013).

These impacts caused by social projects generate opportunities for people living in vulnerable communities, such as sports and cultural incentives, educational support, vocational training, job market boost, personal growth, rights preservation, among others. By bringing children and adolescents closer to opportunities and healthy practices, it is possible to improve the conditions of families, communities, and individuals themselves, as they become more self-sufficient. Moreover, companies that prioritize social causes are seen as “friendly companies” and are even more admired by customers. They also receive tax incentives, which is highly beneficial for organizations (INSTITUTO BH FUTURO, 2021).

Finally, social projects are mainly based on reducing poverty and social inequalities, aiming to promote social and productive inclusion of individuals or groups living in vulnerable situations. These projects seek to restore their potential by providing opportunities for them to develop their skills and capacities, thus achieving significant improvements in their lives.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

Regarding the procedures, the research is classified as a case study (Stake, 1995). In terms of objectives, the research is descriptive in nature. As for the approach, it is qualitative, which means it does not consider numerical representation but instead seeks to understand a phenomenon, social group, or organization. In terms of the temporal horizon, the research is cross-sectional, as data collection was conducted between July and December 2021.

Three techniques were used for data collection: (i) analysis of evaluation forms applied to the school community (students, teachers, parents, and administrators) and activity reports prepared by the project managers; (ii) secondary data collected from the company's and school's websites, as well as available news articles on social media platforms such as local newspapers, Instagram, and Facebook; (iii) literature review and selection of relevant literature to provide theoretical grounding for this study. The content analysis technique (Bardin, 2011) was used to analyze the data previously collected, categorizing the content.

### **IV. RESULTS**

The perspective assumed here was to understand how business leaders contribute to motivating actions of social responsibility and local development, based on the activities carried out within the social project - in the educational context - called “Sowing Knowledge, Harvesting Wisdom”, a concrete action of the partnership between the company *Bandeira Batatas* and the *Palmeirinha State Field School*, both located in the city of *Guarapuava*, *Paraná* state, *Palmeirinha* district.

When analyzing the documentary records of the Social Project, the main activities carried out with the project participants were lectures and group discussions involving professionals from the company, students, teachers, and school staff, addressing topics such as values, morality and ethics, respect, commitment, cooperation, leadership, and management. The records indicate that before the start of the activities, socio-economic questionnaires were administered to assess the students' profiles and select actions and approaches that could effectively contribute to the outcomes.

After the series of lectures at the school, the students conducted a supervised visit to the project's partnering company to familiarize themselves with the location, the organization's reality, and its activities. The documents indicate that during the visit, they had the opportunity to witness the entire production process of *Bandeira Batatas* and subsequently, through periodic meetings at the company, they had the opportunity to actively participate in the process, deepening their knowledge.

The entire potato production process was also incorporated into the school. To achieve this, three greenhouses were constructed and installed for potato preparation, planting, and harvesting. Several stages were established to better monitor the production process, and the activity concluded with the harvest of the product. The students and their families were invited to participate in a lunch featuring dishes made with potatoes, where the theme was further explored.

For this stage, the following actions were defined: a) visits to the school and the company; b) greenhouse preparation; c) soil preparation; d) distribution of potato seeds; e) planting the seeds; f) caring for the plants; g) potato harvest; h) processing and analysis; i) final results of the production process; and j) product tasting.

An important aspect discussed throughout the process, and evident in the students' evaluations, was the focus on sustainable practices. It was highlighted that during the visits to the partnering company, they were shown how to collect rainwater, and they observed the setup of a system that enables 100% utilization of rainwater for potato processing on-site. The students were encouraged to incorporate sustainable practices in their homes, schools, and communities, as well as to correctly manage waste by separating recyclables from other types of waste, among other actions.

Another stage of the project focused on exploring various professions, starting with the school reality involving teachers and other school staff. Subsequently, local companies and their existing positions were presented to help students understand the career progression leading to leadership roles. In this sense, the importance of education was emphasized as a means to reach desired positions or positions within a company.

According to the documents, the aim of the activities was to guide the students towards self-reflection and self-awareness. The meetings also encompassed “being” rather than “having”, through reflection on concepts of justice, equality, brotherhood, empowerment, management, and leadership.

The results indicated that the project's integration into the school contributed to and stimulated students to recognize their reality, providing an opportunity to delve into more complex concepts such as values and ethics, and arousing their interest in other areas of education. In the case of this study, the practice of experimentation through potato cultivation was implemented, as it is an agricultural school where agricultural practices are part of daily life. Additionally, there is a medium-sized potato processing company in the area that employs many people from the region, generating employment and income.

It is affirmed that promoting educational practices involving agriculture and management brings an interdisciplinary approach and stimulates students' interest by involving them in the handling and sustainable utilization of food. Morgado and Santos (2008) reinforce that a garden or greenhouse serves as a “living laboratory”, facilitating the development of various pedagogical and interdisciplinary activities that integrate theory and practice.

Developing social projects in schools is an initiative that highlights the importance of citizenship and social awareness within the community. This type of action is a way to plan and implement interventions that seek to positively transform the surrounding reality of the institution. It has been observed, therefore, that initiatives of this nature improve the quality of life for populations living in vulnerable situations, change students' perspectives and those of their families, alleviate deficiencies in certain areas of life, or even stimulate the necessary motivation for planning a professional career. Such initiatives align with the assumptions of Figueira (2017), suggesting that any process of local development should be led and implemented by the residents themselves to reinvent the territory and its practices.

In this context of transformations, the school plays a strategic role in the development of individuals within the school community, as well as in improving the quality of life for those around it. The school is expected to have a democratic and participatory management approach, valuing “the participation of the school community in the decision-making process, the collective construction of objectives and school practices, dialogue, and the search for consensus” (LIBÂNEO, 2008, p.132). In this sense, companies and their leaders are welcome to establish partnerships with schools. This can be an alternative to promote hands-on experiences in the classroom and provide students with a more comprehensive education.

Based on the reports described in the evaluations, the following improvements were identified: improved engagement and interest in school activities; improved affirmation and understanding as individuals from rural areas and rural schools (identity); decreased dropout rates; increased interest in continuing education; involvement in proposed activities; improved individual and group communication, both inside and outside of school; improved self-esteem; acting and behaving as knowledge multipliers, demonstrating critical thinking and leadership.

Bunn and Fumagalli (2016) mention aspects of leadership and state that success does not solely come from daily actions but rather from the results, victories, and overall performance of the team, directly reflecting on the leader. Thus, leading involves the ability to influence people in different situations and contexts, and when done excellently, it stimulates the commitment of everyone, generating positive results.

Leaders who work in social projects take on the role of social educators. Social projects can be understood as non-formal educational spaces that complement formal education, contextualizing in a less bureaucratic environment, enabling the building of a new relationship with the experience of diversity and the strengthening of citizenship. Understanding leadership as social education and contribution to social projects promotes human development, integrating knowledge and action, theory and practice, science and technology (BRISOLA; RIBEIRO; SEBASTIÁN-HEREDERO, 2020).

Social projects are part of transformative and innovative processes in society. These processes have always existed and have historically evolved according to context, causes, forms, and actors involved. They are developed in various operational arrangements and seek to address the needs of the population based on an understanding of social transformation processes. In this reality, the engagement of individuals, groups, and communities contributes to improving social conditions and quality of life (FERRARINI, 2016).

Nunes et al. (2018) state that the emergence of the topic of “social projects” whether in the scope of companies or communities, is a reflection of political and economic crises that generate social inequality, hunger, and violence. In this sense, actions and projects that aim to create innovative alternatives to address the social demands of vulnerable strata and communities in society are increasing. In light of this, it is understood that the research in question aligns with the authors' views, as the company-school partnership developed a networked

work that was essential to creating synergy in the social and educational fields, increasing the impact of actions and the effectiveness of the outlined project's purposes.

By partnering two institutions, it is possible to highlight that this networked work is essential to create synergy in the social field, increasing the impact of actions and the effectiveness of the outlined purposes in the social project. Strategies for resource mobilization and management improvement are facilitated by the effectiveness of networked actions (NUNES et al., 2018), in this case involving a private company and a public school.

Tollini (2016) adds that involving young people in the reality of the company, through visits and proximity actions, requires effective leadership to encourage attitude, values, and behavioral changes. Based on the Fullan model, the author argues that leadership is essential in a process of change because administrators or managers face much more demanding organizational demands during change than in the day-to-day operations of the organization. It is in a process of change that the administrator must demonstrate leadership qualities to face the forces that cause turbulence in organizations. Thus, the leader is conceived as someone whose authority is based on competence to guide people in the organization during the change (TOLLINI, 2016).

When addressing leadership and placing it in the context of a social project, the investigated ideas should be: purpose, understanding of change, building relationships, creating and sharing knowledge, creativity, common sense, insights, wisdom (TOLLINI, 2016). By conducting activities with the garden, potato cultivation, and engagement with the company, the adolescents from the "Semeando conhecimento, colhendo sabedoria" project were impacted by these ideas, aligning with what the literature suggests.

In the long term, social projects and developed strategies have a much greater positive impact than their immediate effect in a particular context, challenging existing social relationships. This makes the actions taken a source of social transformation and contributes to the emergence of new models of development (CRISES, 2013).

Lastly, key concepts of local development such as cooperation, solidarity, and community belonging (OLIVEIRA, 2020) were evident from the project planning to the evaluation of its results.

## V. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the findings, it became evident that the role of company-school partnerships is not to "compensate" for the actions (or lack thereof) of the State, but rather to contribute to improvements in the surrounding community. In this sense, the activities carried out in the "Sowing Knowledge, Harvesting Wisdom" project focused on concepts such as leadership, identity, respect, communication, engagement, cooperation, local impact, among others. Some of the actions included lectures and involving students in the potato planting and processing project through a greenhouse built at the school. In addition to these activities, the students visited the partnering company and witnessed the entire potato production process.

The research results demonstrate that the company's social responsibility towards the local community, implemented through a Social Project involving students, brings benefits to all parties involved. Participants felt more motivated to stay in school and continue their studies; their academic performance, self-esteem, and communication skills improved; they strengthened their identity ties with the local culture, and actively engaged in setting up the greenhouse. One of the identified outcomes is the suggestion to offer the project to more classes at the school.

As for possible limitations of the research, it is emphasized that the generated knowledge is based on the references and characteristics selected by the researchers, which is influenced by subjectivities. Furthermore, as an indication for future research, it is suggested to expand the data collection by also administering evaluation forms to the project leaders within the company.

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